

# GOLDEN LOANS FOR A SILVER ANNIVERSARY

By KATHARINE KUH



—Collection, Mrs. Mellon Bruce.

"Bazille et Camille—Study for *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*," by Claude Monet.

**B**ECAUSE TODAY we are confronted with a redundancy of art from all periods and places, and because art is discussed, discovered, analyzed, investigated, and appreciated *ad nauseam*, there is sometimes little or nothing to say about better-known, frequently shown movements. So we turn to re-evaluation, a hackneyed word in our current art lexicon. Ceaselessly re-evaluating everything from aboriginal carvings to abstract expressionism, we remake history with reckless speed.

When I started out for Washington to see the National Gallery's twenty-fifth anniversary exhibition, which opens this week and is composed almost entirely of French impressionist, post-impressionist, and related works, I realized that most of the artists I was about to encounter had already become household names. Cézanne, Van Gogh, Degas, Monet, Renoir, Gauguin are often more familiar

to Americans than Velázquez, Titian, or Rubens. But once in Washington, quite frankly, I found myself engaged in the popular pursuit of re-evaluating a period. And, let me add, there was much to re-evaluate because of the special character of the exhibition lent by Andrew Mellon's children. Two hundred forty-six paintings, drawings, and watercolors represent the personal tastes of Mrs. and Mr. Paul Mellon and Mrs. Mellon Bruce, the two latter being the son and daughter of the man who founded the National Gallery and endowed it with some of its most memorable works. Paintings that have rarely or in certain cases never before been exhibited in America are available in the present show for study and comparison with other more familiar ones.

As a whole, the two collections share certain general characteristics. Emphasis throughout is on intimate, often small

works obviously geared to home enjoyment. There has been little attempt to buy monumental compositions; it is rather domestic paintings adapted to private pleasure that keynote the exhibition. In most cases, subtle color, painterly excellence, and sophisticated understatement distinguish these canvases. In a word, they are eminently French. What one misses occasionally is a jarring note, a violence that might disrupt this idyllic world of gentle interiors and golden landscapes.

Even Van Gogh is seen in subdued form, with little of his usual slashing assault. The four Arles paintings are small, contained compositions, as is also the early, wonderful *Flower Beds in Holland*, a revelation of Van Gogh's neat Dutch heritage. From a few years later, a tiny, jewel-like Paris scene recalls the artist's brief encounter with impressionism. Only in *Green Wheat Fields, Au-*





—Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

**"The Plum," by Edouard Manet.**

vers does one glimpse his characteristic turbulence, but even here it has been considerably restrained.

Curiously, the true expressionist of the show is not Van Gogh, who along with Munch is commonly considered the father of that movement, but Monet, the acknowledged leader of impressionism. For too long this vigorous artist has been stereotyped under a convenient label. The dazzling panorama of his paintings once again reveals him as less interested in the facts of nature than in his own emotions in the presence of nature. He emerges as an explosive, perverse colorist, as an artist at once capable of muted control and ecstatic exuberance. For these are not merely light-struck landscapes; they are riots of torrential color and driving pigment that mirror the artist's urgent reactions both to his own and to nature's volatility. Of the three fine figure compositions included, the earliest, *Study for Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, shows a couple (the painter Bazille and Monet's wife, Camille) in a boldly brushed landscape where light filters through foliage to play over figures conceived with candid-camera spontaneity. From a year later (1867) comes the famous scene of the artist's son Jean in his cradle, a painting endearingly personal and yet composed with unorthodox daring. Cut in two by pyramidal drapery, the composition is held together by a

foreshortened cradle that assumes a strangely awkward but dominating presence. Here, a domestic everyday scene takes on unexpectedly heroic proportions. And, indeed, this kind of paradox seems indigenous to a period bent on remaking specific, familiar, and even banal images by projecting them in new light from new angles.

If Monet, represented by no fewer than a dozen paintings (many of them major works), is a star performer, Bonnard runs him a close second with sixteen pictures ranging from the 1890 *Paris, Rue de Parme on Bastille Day* to a landscape of 1944. His early works, partly Japanese in design, partly French *fin de siècle* in spirit, are filled with cool nostalgia. Later, still under the spell of refined Japanese simplifications, Bonnard introduced palpitating color areas that unfold and interact in such elusive waves as to suggest they are inhaling and exhaling. The paintings breathe; they have a life of their own.

As a rule, the drawings in the two collections are less distinguished than the paintings. The Mellons, it would seem, prefer the interplay of color and pigment to the balder medium of draftsmanship. Be that as it may, their joint holdings in no sense make up a routine exhibition. The show poses questions and surprises; it forces comparisons.

Take, for instance, the juxtaposition

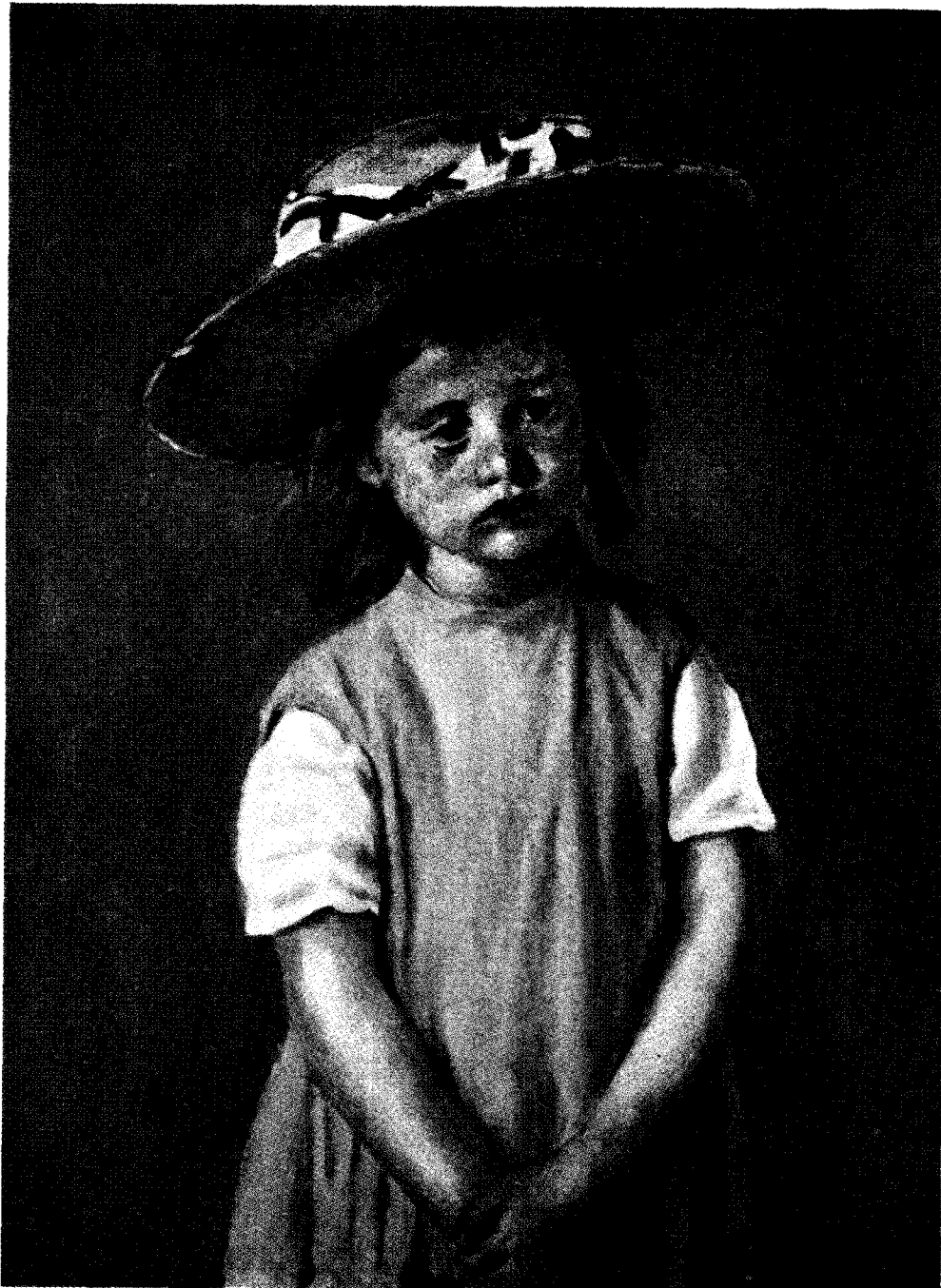


—Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

**"Paris, Rue de Parme on Bastille Day," by Pierre Bonnard.**

of two women painters, Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. Seen in close proximity, the American towers over her French contemporary. Though Morisot was a more sensitive artist, she was also less independent. One feels that she was dominated by her brother-in-law, Manet, and by the impressionists, that her work rarely went beyond paraphrasing theirs—always, to be sure, with charming femininity. Mary Cassatt's paintings, on the other hand, are also feminine but sturdier, more personal, and, as befits their American antecedents, far dryer. One of her masterpieces and a true *tour de force* is an interior with four immense overstuffed blue chairs on one of which a little girl is sprawled. For some reason, the insistently acid blue fails to overwhelm a composition that miraculously succeeds by dint of sheer defiance and an astute tilted perspective.

There are other surprises. An entire room of Manet spotlights how pellucid, how direct was his vision. Typical is *The Plum*, painted with this artist's usual bravura, but more modern than works by many of his followers. The detached seated figure becomes a foil for blazing light as well as ballast for a meticulously organized design. Background, table, and pensive young woman are joined in a deliberate plan. Already in 1877 Manet was paving the way for our so-called cool painters of today. And



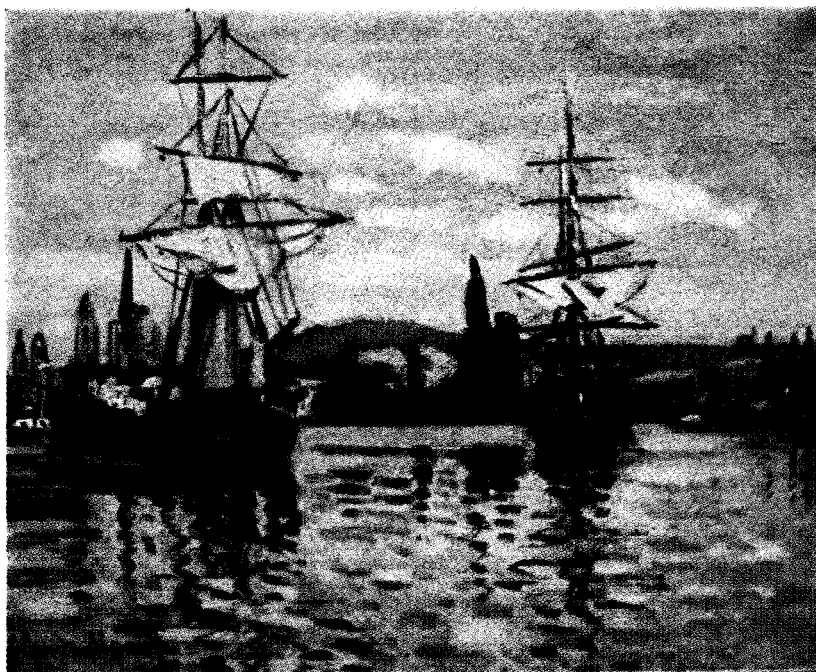
—Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.  
“Child in a Straw Hat.” by Mary Cassatt





—Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

**"Landscape at Le Pouldu, Brittany," by Paul Gauguin**

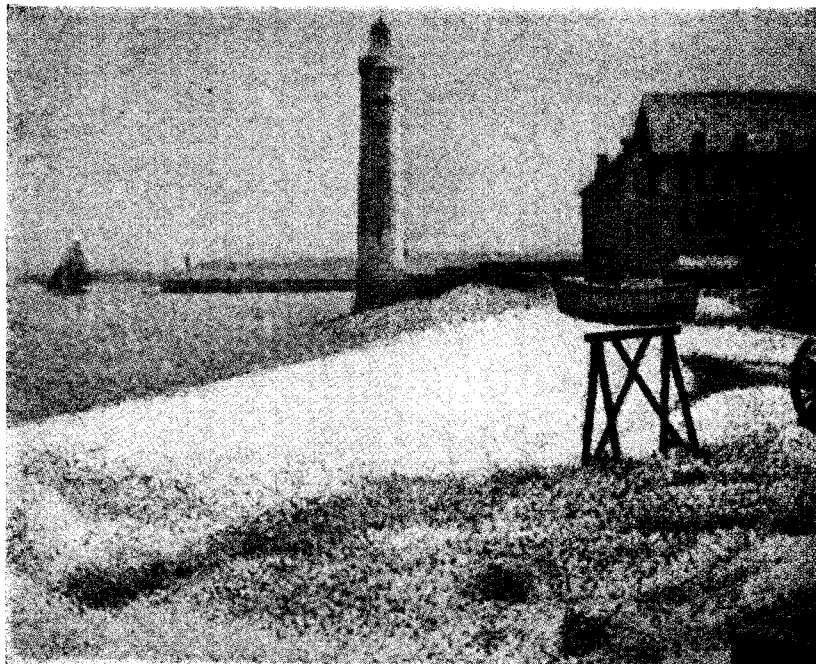


—Collection, Mrs. Mellon Bruce.

**"Ships at Anchor on the Seine," by Claude Monet**



*-Collection, Mrs. Mellon Bruce.*  
**"Young Woman Braiding Her Hair," by Auguste Renoir**



*-Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.*  
**"The Lighthouse at Honfleur," by Georges Seurat**



*—Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.*

**“A la Bastille (Nini Peau de Chien)-The Absinthe Drinker (Jeanne Wenz),” by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec**



in his street scene with flags, dated a year later, he provided a prototype for Childe Hassam's innumerable compositions based on rippling American flags.

Nor should one pass lightly over the group of fifteen Pissarros, a varied sequence surveying this impressionist's entire development. Here his debt to Corot, Millet, Seurat, and his fellow impressionists is clear, but, throughout, his own steady voice imbues his paintings with unswerving integrity. Always in his work, love of the land is both basic and authentic. If at times he seems somewhat heavy-handed, he is also the impressionist who least compromised with form, a fact that may explain his strong hold on Cézanne. As usual, I ask myself why Cézanne, here greatly outnumbered by his contemporaries (works by him are scarce these days) remains the undisputed giant of the exhibition. For this he does, if only because of two paintings, *Houses in Provence* and *Boy in a Blue Waistcoat*. Disregarding sensuous surfaces, beguilement, unusual angles, appealing color, and psychological content, Cézanne still wins. I suppose the answer lies in his inexorable staying power—in the permanence and universal application of his vision, in its total timelessness. He never seems dated. Even today, in a shaky world of speeding illusions, he proclaims continuity, order, and stability in a language we can trust. His paintings are not nostalgic reminders of the past; they are solid affirmations, sometimes difficult to accept because they are based on interrelationships so tight as to become abstractions.

Certain outstanding yet offbeat works I find unforgettable. A very early Gauguin *Still Life with Oysters* disputes the legend that this artist was an amateur during his early twenties. A studio inte-



—Collection, Mrs. Mellon Bruce.

**"The Cab Horse, Boulevard des Batignolles, Paris," by Pierre Bonnard.**

rior by Bazille could readily be mistaken for a top Corot. Too often this minor impressionist is underrated. From the hand of Odilon Redon come two small elusive landscapes, both more naturalistic than is usual with this artist. They are mute evidence that Redon's poetry can exist without his proverbial symbolism. And not least, a magical canvas by Courbet called *Calm Sea*, a painting with only water, a bit of sand, a low horizon, and a vast expanse of quivering sky, is perhaps the most evocative work in the show. Done more than a century ago, it foretells the abstract color compositions of Mark Rothko.

Why, one wonders, are there twenty-

eight Redons? The number seems excessive, for though several of the smaller works are of incomparable quality, they become monotonous when repeated indefinitely. No matter how tender his sensibilities, Redon saw the world through a circumscribed lens. Especially in his two large seascapes one senses his limitations, for neither has the scale or sweep of a great marine. To compare him to his disciple Monet is to understand the difference between an accomplished parochial artist and a world figure. I also ask: Where is Delacroix? As an outstanding precursor of impressionism, surely he belongs in this splendid survey along with Courbet and Corot.



—Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

**"Beach at Boulogne-sur-Mer," by Edouard Manet.**



## BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Edited by Horace Sutton

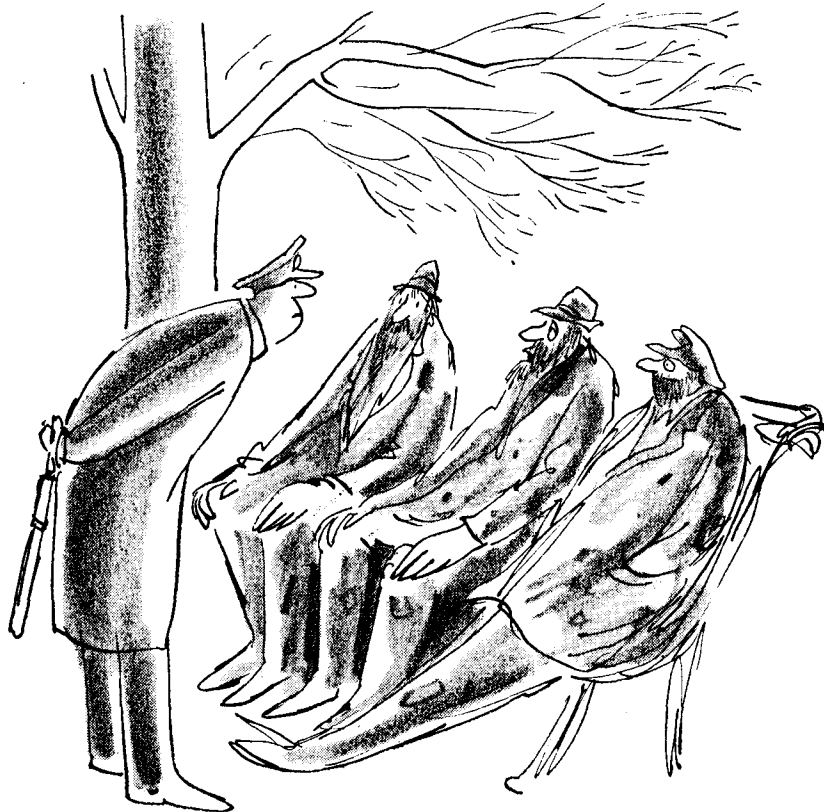
### Lost City of the Sybarites

**A**COLYTES OF La Dolce Vita as it applies to food, wine, raiment, and all things sensuous have had their hearts uplifted by the recent discovery of the site of the 2,600-year-old city of Sybaris, lush cradle of the Sybarites, in the instep of the Italian boot. At long last they may find in its ruins new evidence to settle the tantalizing controversy as to how sybaritic were these ancient Greek colonists who, rightly or wrongly, are credited with giving the English language the word for lotus-eaters. Did they in fact lose their city to their enemies because they had been softened up by the good life or has history made them the butt of a puritanical calumny?

After nearly a hundred years of searching, Sybaris, the capital of Magna Graecia seven centuries before Christ, or its port, has been definitely located in Northern Calabria overlooking the Ionian Sea by a joint expedition of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Lerica Foundation of Milan. The

archeologists scored their breakthrough not with the traditional spade but with a Space Age electronic gimmick called the "rubidium magnetometer." To this date they have not laid eyes on the ruins or touched them with their hands but they know they are there.

Dr. Froelich G. Rainey, director of the University Museum, explains that the magnetometer enabled the team to map the outlines of temples, walls, and paved roads in a two- to three-mile area on the Crati Plain buried as deep as twenty feet below the surface without the need of excavation, and they later confirmed their findings by spot drilling. The gadget is 100 times more sensitive, and can operate at greater depths, than any other detection instrument and it opens up promising new horizons in the never-ending hunt for treasures of the past that cannot be seen from the ground. The magnetometer was first used in the Explorer space probe in 1961 to measure ultra-low magnetic fields thousands of miles from the earth.



H. Sutton

"If you must know, Officer, we're students of human nature, and you're interrupting class."

It may be a long cold winter, and it may be never, before the trippers can poke among the remains of Sybaris because they lie fifteen feet below the water table and the cost of excavating them might bankrupt a Croesus, but even in their buried state they rank as Italy's most intriguing non-attraction this spring. If nothing else, their discovery has focused new interest on the exotic tribe of Achaeans who founded the city, lived it up so gracefully for 200 years during the Golden Age of Greek colonialism, and were snuffed out in 510 B.C.

Diodorus of Sicily, the classic historian for this period, states flatly that the Sybarites were "slaves to their belly and lovers of luxury" and some authorities agree with him, but others tend to the conviction that they may have been maligned by the guilty conscience of their conquerors. Most of what we know of them comes from the garrulous Greek scholar Athenaeus, who wrote about them in the fifteen-volume *Deipnosophists* (Sophists at Dinner). As a native of Egypt and a resident of Rome toward the close of the second century A.D., Athenaeus attended what may have been the longest dinner party in history and he must have been the greatest name-and-place-dropper of all time.

All the savants agree, however, that Sybaris was a rich and powerful city-state and spawned a score or more of subject colonies on both coasts of Italy as far north as present-day Paestum on the Gulf of Salerno. The Sybarites occupied a fertile valley between two small rivers, with green forests, pasture, and vineyards, and they controlled the portage routes between the Ionian and Tyrrhenian seas, permitting them to transport goods without crossing the treacherous Straits of Messina. Their agriculture and trade produced the wealth and leisure that enabled them to lead a life of luxury, but this was also true of other Greek cities such as Taranto.

**I**F we believe Athenaeus, however, the Sybarites did indeed eat very high up on the humming bird and quaffed deeply of the cup that glazes. They were great hands at public and private feasts, it seems, planned them a year in advance, and insisted on multi-course meals. Their tables were piled high with meat, poultry, fish, cheese, fruit, and pastry. Their dinners were topped off by the fruity *vin du pays*. The men dined from couches abutting the tables but their women ate in private. If a chef concocted a succulent dish he was rewarded with a golden crown and accorded exclusive rights to it for one year—something Brillat-Savarin and the devotees of the Cordon Rouge School would have applauded.

After one of their stoutest trenchermen, Timaeus of Sybaris, partook of a